Rochester Topfree Picnic Enjoys Community Support

By Mary Lou Schloss

This year, on June 25, over 40 women were topfree at a 4½ hour picnic in Genesee Valley Park in Rochester, New York. The weather cooperated with a hot, humid day on which shirts were uncomfortable for anyone. Activities at the picnic included softball, volleyball and frisbee, canoeing on the Genesee River and eating great food. Lainee Dexter wrote and recorded the song, "I'd Rather Be In Rochester — Topfree" for the occasion, based on the City's "I'd Rather Be In Rochester" motto. The picnic was covered by all local television stations as well as newspapers. Wire service reports of the picnic resulted in news stories in papers across the country and many requests for guest spots on radio talk shows.

The growing acceptance of topfree equality was seen in the local reaction. The police stopped by the picnic and left without comment. Joggers and bicyclists passed by, often with a friendly wave. No voyeurs appeared; no negative comments were made. Any positive editorial appeared in a local newspaper. Women have increasingly been topfree both individually and in small groups in Rochester area parks on hot days without problems. New York State's discriminatory Exposure of a Person law may become ineffectual through lack of enforcement, although efforts to change the law are still underway.

This year we asked local officials to proclaim June 21 Topfree Equality Day. This gave us the opportunity to present speeches on the importance of topfree equality before County Legislature and City Council meetings. On June 21, we presented an educational forum attended by over 70 people including the film "Killing Us Softly, Advertising's Image of Women" dealing with the negative effects of our culture's artificial beauty ideal on women, a fashion show on changing bathing suit styles with models of old swim suits for men, moving talks by members of the Coalition for Topfree Equality, and much good discussion.

This is the third summer for a June topfree picnic with steady growth in the number of women participating. The support within the community has grown dramatically during that period. Last year's picnic, with about 20 topfree women, was also without harrassment.

However, at the original picnic two years ago, seven women who came to be known as the Topfree Seven were arrested for refusing to put on shirts when ordered by police. The women were charged with Exposure of a Person, a New York State law which requires women but not men to cover their chests in public. There are two exceptions to this law. One allows a woman to expose her breasts in public to breastfeed an infant. This amendment was passed as a direct result of lobbying by Rochester Naturist members. For the period of one year, a woman nursing her baby in NY State was potentially subject to arrest. The second exception states that women are allowed to remove their shirts to perform or entertain. Thus a woman may legally bare her breasts to sell drinks to men in a topless bar, but she may not legally enjoy the sun and water topfree on a beach with family and friends.

Volleyball at the Topfree Picnic.

Photos by Irv Zwirn

Kathie Reilly, right, and Mary Lou Schloss are interviewed by the media.

The Topfree Seven received worldwide media attention; members of the group even appeared on the Donahue Show. During a 3½ day trial, legal briefs and testimony were presented to show that no important government interest is served by requiring women to cover their chests. Far from serving an important government interest, we showed that women are being harmed, both physically and emotionally, by the breast obsession that exists in our country which is reinforced by requiring women to keep their breasts covered. Witnesses explained how the ideal beauty image portrayed in advertising and the way women are objectified results in women having poorer body self concepts than men. Asking little girls to wear a shirt while their brothers play topfree gives them the message that their bodies are unacceptable, dirty or obscene. Women are dissatisfied with their own breasts when they compare them to the unrealistic, Barbie doll type shown in media and advertising. Breast augmentation surgery is the leading cosmetic surgery in our country today; breasts lifts aren't far behind. Fear of disfigurement interferes with women seeking diagnosis and treatment for breast cancer which is 90% curable with early treatment. Women feed their babies with bottles rather than having to deal with exposing their breasts in public.

People becoming familiar with the great variety of women's breasts in natural, non-sexual situations would help to normalize women's breasts. It is the suppression of breasts that creates the obsession that exists in our culture today. Topfree beaches are the norm in Europe together with many clothing optional beaches. They are related to a healthier, less exploitive, more mature attitude toward women and their bodies. The rates of breastfeeding are higher in Europe; the rates of breast augmention surgery, breast cancer and teen pregnancy are much lower.

Subsequent to the trial, the charges against the Topfree Seven were dismissed on First Amendment Freedom of Speech grounds. Unfortunately, the judge did not rule the law unconstitutional on grounds of Equal Protection of the Law for women as desired. The District Attorney is now appealing the dismissal so the Topfree Seven case will be before the courts again soon.

Meanwhile, the Coalition for Topfree Equality has begun lobbying the State legislature for changes in the law to eliminate sections which discriminate against women. Joining in the lobbying are Rochester Naturist Society and Tri-State Metro Naturists from the New York City area. The groups are also seeking an amendment which would allow municipalities to establish clothing optional recreation areas.

Topfree Equality is an important issue for nudists, not only because of its impact upon women, but also because historically topfree beaches have been a step toward the establishment of nude beaches.

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